

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Teaching Materials: Refusals to Invitations in American English

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Abstract

First, it is noted that refusals to invitations need to be considered in the network of invitations. Expressions of refusals in the textbooks are then examined. Finally, semantic formulas of refusals are presented, and the order, frequency and content of the formulas are discussed.

Key Words : refusal, invitation, rules of language use, speech act, sociolinguistics

I. Introduction

Learning a language means learning the rules of language use as well as the rules of the formal linguistic system. A learner of a new language needs to master the appropriate use of linguistic forms of that language. Therefore, it is necessary for materials developers and textbook writers to obtain information about the rules of language use and incorporate such information into teaching materials. There are, however, still textbooks which seem to pay little attention to those rules. For example, the following expressions are an invitation and refusals to the invitation presented in a textbook for Japanese high school students:

Won't you come along with us?

- Sorry, I can't.
- I'm sorry, but I won't be able to make it.
- I wish I could.

(*Lighthouse*, p. 28)

It seems that the learners using this textbook have great difficulty understanding how to refuse an invitation in a real life situation as there is no information about the rules of language use. Why are these three expressions presented though there are other expressions of refusals? What is the difference between these three expressions? In order to answer these questions, it is necessary to study the expressions of refusals from the viewpoint of sociolinguistics.

II. Refusals to Invitations

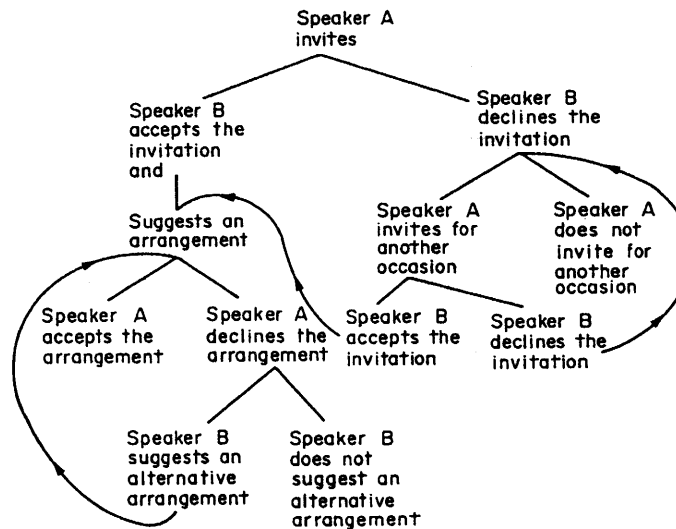
1. Refusals in the Network of Invitations

When Speaker B refuses Speaker A's invitation, the structure of the conversation is coded as follows:

A: invites

B: refuses the invitation

In natural conversation, however, refusals often involve long negotiated sequences. Johnson(1979, 1982) presents the network of invitations as follows:



Johnson (1979, 1982)

According to this network, the next structure of conversation between Speaker A and Speaker B may take place:

A: invites

B: refuses the invitation

A: invites for another occasion

B: refuses the invitation

A: invites for another occasion

B: accepts the invitation and suggests an arrangement

A: refuses the arrangement

B: suggests an alternative arrangement

A: accepts the arrangement

In this situation, Speaker B refuses Speaker A's invitation twice and the third refusal is made by Speaker A.

2. Refusals to Invitations in Textbooks

In order to use a language properly, we have to know what forms of the language are appropriate for given situations. Cohen(1996) explains the difference between two expressions of refusals as follows:

For example, if a student is asked to dinner by his or her professor and cannot accept the invitation, the reply "No way!" would probably constitute an inappropriate choice of form for realizing the speech act set of refusal. The problem is that, sociolinguistically, this phrase would be interpreted as rude and insulting, unless the student had an especially close relationship with the professor and the utterance was made in jest. A more appropriate response might be: "I would love to, but I have a prior engagement I can't get out of."

It seems that the level of formality is useful for learners of English when they select the appropriate linguistic forms. The following examples are from three textbooks which present the expressions of refusals to invitations.

Example 1

Formal

I'm very sorry but...
I would like very much to go but...
It's very kind of you to invite me but...
I hope you'll invite me again sometime.

Informal

Thanks but...
I'm sorry but...
I'd love to but...
Can I take a raincheck?

(Kettering 1975)

Example 2

Informal

I can't. I've gotta...

General

I'd really like to, but I have to
....Thanks for the invitation, though.
I wish I could, but I have to
....Thanks, anyway.
I'm sorry. I'm not going to be
able to make it because I have to
....But thanks for the invitation.

(Reinhart and Fisher 1985)

Example 3

More Formal I'm awfully sorry, but I have other plans.

I wish I could, but...

I'd really like to, but...

Sorry. I've already made plans for Saturday.

Less Formal Oh darn! Have to...

(Tillitt and Bruder 1985)

It is true that these three examples which present a list of expressions with a level of formality are very useful, but some problems remain. First, there are expressions not common to all three examples. For example, I'M SORRY type expressions and I'D LIKE TO type expressions are present in the three examples. But THANK YOU type expressions are not present in Example 3, and Example 1 does not have I WISH I COULD type expressions.

Second, what are the differences between expressions within the same category? For instance, how does the learner who uses Example 1 and studies informal expressions of refusals to invitations choose the appropriate one from the four expressions?

Third, THANK YOU type expressions precede the other expressions in Example 1, but they come at the end in Example 2.

Finally, are the parts which begin with *but* in all the three examples important in the expressions of refusals to invitations? What are the expressions such as "I can't" and "Oh darn!" ?

In order to solve those problems, it is necessary to examine the expressions of refusals from the viewpoint of semantic formulas.

III. Semantic Formulas of Refusals

Semantic formulas used in realizing the act of apology are described in Fraser(1981). Furthermore, Olshtain and Cohen(1983) point out that apology has a speech act set which consists of some semantic formulas. It seems that refusals also consist of a sequence of semantic formulas. For example, the following is a general semantic formula of refusals presented in Kana(1982):

$$\pm \left(\begin{array}{c} \text{Apology} \\ \text{Thanks} \end{array} \right) + \text{Excuse} \pm (\text{Alternative})$$

Kana (1982)

According to this formula, the excuse is the only essential part, and the apology or thanks and the alternative are optional. The alternative follows the excuse, while the apology/thanks, which don't occur at the same time, may either precede or follow the excuse.

(1) A: Say, have you two been to Cloud 9 yet?

B: What's that?

A: It's a disco—the best in L.A. Look, if you're not busy tonight, would you like to go dancing?

B: Thanks, but we've got tickets for a concert at the Hollywood Bowl tonight.

(*Life Styles 3*, p. 17)

- (2) A: Oh, hi, Maria. Hi, Mac. Are you two doing anything this evening? I was thinking of going to see *All That Jazz* and I don't feel like going alone.
B: Thanks, but I have to study.
C: I'd really like to go with you, but I have to study too. How about tomorrow?
(*Life Styles 2*, p. 52)

In (1) and (2), Speaker B refuses Speaker A's invitation, using the same semantic formulas: the thanks and the excuse. However, the structure of Speaker C's refusal in (2) cannot be explained in the framework of Kana's formula. Speaker C states the excuse and the alternative after saying "I'd really like to go with you." This preliminary remark also functions as a part of a refusal, but it is not included in Kana's formula. This optional part of refusals is called "adjuncts" in Beebe *et al.*(1990), who present a number of semantic formulas of refusals as follows:

Classification of Refusals

I. Direct

- A. Performative(e.g. "I refuse.")
- B. Nonperformative statement
 - 1. "No."
 - 2. Negative willingness/ability (e.g. "I can't." "I won't." "I don't think so.")

II. Indirect

- A. Statement of regret(e.g. "I'm sorry..." "I feel terrible...")
- B. Wish(e.g. "I wish I could help you...")
- C. Excuse, reason, explanation(e.g. "My children will be home that night." "I have a headache.")
- D. Statement of alternative
 - 1. I can do X instead of Y(e.g. "I'd rather..." "I'd prefer...")
 - 2. Why don't you do X instead of Y(e.g. "Why don't you ask someone else?")
- E. Set condition for future or past acceptance(e.g. "If you had asked me earlier, I would have...")
- F. Promise of future acceptance(e.g. "I'll do it next time." "I promise I'll..." "Next time I'll..." —using "will" of promise or "promise")
- G. Statement of principle(e.g. "I never do business with friends.")
- H. Statement of philosophy(e.g. "One can't be too careful.")
- I. Attempt to dissuade interlocutor
 - 1. Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester(e.g. "I won't be any fun tonight" to refuse an invitation)
 - 2. Guilt trip(e.g. waitress to customers who want to sit a while: "I can't make a living off people who just order coffee.")
 - 3. Criticize the request/requester, etc.(statement of negative feeling or opinion); insult/attack(e.g. "Who do you think you are?" "That's a

terrible idea!")

4. Request for help, empathy, and assistance by dropping or holding the request.
5. Let the interlocutor off the hook(e.g. "Don't worry about it." "That's okay." "You don't have to.")
6. Self-defense(e.g. "I'm trying my best." "I'm doing all I can do." "I no do nutting wrong.")

J. Acceptance that functions as a refusal

1. Unspecific or indefinite reply
2. Lack of enthusiasm

K. Avoidance

1. Nonverbal
 - a. Silence
 - b. Hesitation
 - c. Do nothing
 - d. Physical departure
2. Verbal
 - a. Topic switch
 - b. Joke
 - c. Repetition of part of request, etc.(e.g. "Monday?")
 - d. Postponement(e.g. "I'll think about it.")
 - e. Hedging(e.g. "Gee, I don't know." "I'm not sure.")

Adjuncts to Refusals

1. Statement of positive opinion/feeling or agreement(e.g. "That's a good idea..." "I'd love to...")
2. Statement of empathy(e.g. "I realize you are in a difficult situation.")
3. Pause fillers(e.g. "uhh." "well." "oh." "uhm.")
4. Gratitude/appreciation

IV. Order, Frequency, and Content of Semantic Formulas

Beebe *et al.*(1990) found that pragmatic transfer influenced the English of Japanese speakers in the United States in terms of order, frequency, and content of the semantic formulas. Such empirically based information is very useful in developing materials and writing textbooks.

1. Order of Semantic Formulas

Tillitt and Bruder(1985) state that the following order is appropriate in refusing an invitation: apology, reason for refusal, thanks for the invitation, and perhaps a second apology. Beebe *et al.*(1990), however, say that Americans tend to begin refusals to invitations with adjuncts. They also say that Americans add an expression of gratitude/appreciation at the

end of their refusals to a friend, though not with others.

2. Frequency of Semantic Formulas

According to Kana(1982), the excuse is the essential part of refusals. Reinhart and Fisher(1985) and Coffey(1983) say that it is usually considered polite to give some kind of explanation when refusing an invitation.

Beebe *et al.*(1990) state that Americans increased the number of semantic formulas with increasing familiarity between the interlocutors. That is, Americans use more semantic formulas when refusing the invitation from a friend than they do when refusing the invitation of a more distant person.

3. Content of Semantic Formulas

Reinhart and Fisher(1985) say that the excuse can be rather vague. However, Coffey(1983) points out that it is considered impolite or a little abrupt to only say, for example: "Thanks, but I have other plans." According to Beebe *et al.*(1990), Americans tend to specify their plans.

V. Conclusion

As is pointed by Beebe *et al.*(1990), refusals are a major cross-cultural "sticking point" for many nonnative speakers. In this paper, refusals to invitations have been discussed from a sociolinguistic point of view. However, there remain other refusals: refusals to requests, refusals to offers, refusals to suggestions, and it is also necessary to make a sociolinguistic analysis of such refusal expressions. The important thing to recognize is that materials developers and textbook writers have to continue a sociolinguistic study on speech acts and get important information on the rules of language use.

Texts:

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